



Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities



Needs Assessment Report to the Virginia Disability Services Council -- February 2006

Introduction

The Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities ("ACPD" or "the Commission") serves as Alexandria's Disability Services Board ("DSB"). The ACPD is a 17 member volunteer citizen body appointed by the Mayor and City Council. The Commission is comprised of 14 citizen members, a representative of the Alexandria Commission on Aging, and two representatives of the business community (one from the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce and one at-large). A majority of the citizen members are persons with disabilities. The Commission is organized into an executive committee and five standing committees, as well as ad hoc committees.

Through its committees, the Commission focuses its work on issues related to transportation, accessibility, housing, employment, and public awareness. ACPD's monthly meetings are typically held at City Hall, Room 2000, at 7 p.m. on the second Wednesday of each month. The ACPD invites and encourages Alexandrians with disabilities to attend and to offer feedback, express concerns, and/or give commendations on disability-related issues in the City of Alexandria.

Nearly fifteen years before the Americans with Disabilities Act ("ADA") and ten years prior to the Virginians with Disabilities Act, the City of Alexandria established in 1974 what is now the Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities to ensure that residents with disabilities could actively participate in decisions and recommend policies regarding City and state laws concerning, among other things, the removal of physical, attitudinal, social, and economic barriers confronting persons with disabilities.

The City of Alexandria is a diverse community with many cultures represented by our residents, businesses, employees, and visitors.

Purpose

Every three years, the ACPD in its role as the City's Disability Services Board surveys people with disabilities, family members of persons with disabilities, and service providers about the available and needed services in Alexandria. The results of the

survey are used to develop a local Needs Assessment Report, which is provided to state and local officials. This Report is used to help determine what areas need priority funding and targeted resources to improve the independence of people with physical and sensory disabilities in the City of Alexandria. Locally obtained information on the needs of Alexandrians with physical and sensory disabilities is of great help to the ACPD when setting priorities, planning activities, and obtaining support from the Mayor, City Council, and others. The Needs Assessment also is important to state-level agencies and organizations as they provide much needed information about needs, service gaps, and systems issues across the state.

Data Collection

In September 2005, the ACPD disseminated its needs assessment survey in several ways. It was mailed to persons with disabilities and family members of persons with disabilities known to the Commission and to local service providers. It was also distributed at the City's libraries, therapeutic recreation facilities, group homes, JobLink employment center, Citizen Assistance office, Housing, senior centers, adult day care center, and Special Education Parent Resources Center. It was sent by electronic mail to a long-term care electronic mailing list, a neighborhood association, and all City of Alexandria employees with encouragement to all to forward it to anyone who might be interested in completing it. In addition, a notice was sent to subscribers of the City's E-News service and an online version of the survey was placed on the City's web site. A link to the survey also was placed on the web site of the Northern Virginia Resource Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons and on the web site of the National Organization on Disability. Also, press releases were published in the *Alexandria Gazette Packet* and the *Alexandria Times*.

As a result of electronic and Internet distribution of the ACPD's Needs Assessment survey, it is impossible to determine an exact number of surveys distributed and a corresponding response rate. The number of surveys returned, however, was most disappointing to the Commission. A total of 46 surveys were returned. Of those, 54% were from a person with a disability, 26% from family members of a person with a disability, 15% from service providers, and 5% did not identify their relationship to the person being described.

It is important to note that the ACPD is not confident that the results or findings in this Needs Assessment report are a representative sample or a true or realistic basis of the needs of persons with physical and sensory disabilities in the City of Alexandria.

United States Census 2000 Data

According to the United States Census, the total population of the City of Alexandria in 2000 was 128,283 and the total number of persons with disabilities was 17,559, or 14% (NOTE: this is all disabilities, not just physical and sensory).

Looking further into the U.S. Census Bureau's Disability Status by Sex: 2000 data, which identifies the population from ages 5 –15, 16 – 64, and 65 and over, a breakdown of physical and sensory disabilities can be identified.

Specifically, the population of persons 5 – 15 years old was 11,481. Of those, 109 reported physical disabilities and 71 reported sensory disabilities. In other words, less than 2% of this age group reported having physical and/or sensory disabilities in the City of Alexandria.

The population of persons 16 – 64 years old was 94,969. Of those, 3,149 reported physical disabilities and 1,330 reported sensory disabilities. In other words, less than 5% of this age group reported having physical and/or sensory disabilities in the City of Alexandria.

The population of persons 65 years and older was 10,486. Of those, 2,842 reported physical disabilities and 1,138 reported sensory disabilities. In other words, 38% of this age group reported having physical and/or sensory disabilities in the City of Alexandria.

Overall, the population aged 5 and up was 116,936. Of those, 6,100 reported physical disabilities and 2,539 reported sensory disabilities. In other words, more than 7% of those aged 5 and up reported having physical and/or sensory disabilities in the City of Alexandria.

Summary of Results

The majority of the Needs Assessment survey's respondents were aged 23 – 59 with 64% falling in that range. Ages 0 – 22 accounted for 23% and 13% were 60 and older.

Of the disabilities listed on the survey, 30% of the respondents identified themselves as having a physical disability; 30% marked deaf / hard of hearing; 27% listed other including epilepsy, diabetes, quadriplegia, developmental delay, stroke, heart, MR/DD, cervical disc syndrome, HIV positive, and Alzheimer's; and 25% checked blind / vision impairment. The remaining percentages are as follows: 18% chronic medical; 18% learning disability; 11% brain injury; 9% ADD/ ADHD; 9% autism spectrum; and 9% speech impairment. (Note: given that some have more than one disability, the percentages will not total 100%.)

As noted above, the ACPD believes that given the low return of surveys, the findings and conclusions in this report are not necessarily based on a representative sample of persons with physical and sensory disabilities in Alexandria and their needs. However, a generalization can be made that the results of the returned survey do point to some of the recognized needs in the community.

The Needs Assessment survey respondents' top three unmet needs (checked as seriously affecting them) were accessible transportation; medical and therapeutic services including accessible, affordable medical insurance and services; and accessible housing. The lack of available accessible transportation is exaggerated by problems with the newly hired contractor providing these services.

Accessible Transportation

As noted in the surveys returned, accessible transportation continues to be the primary concern for persons with disabilities in Alexandria. While undoubtedly there are a number of transportation providers and means in the City of Alexandria, accessible, affordable, and perhaps most importantly, reliable transportation remains as an essential unmet need.

One example of the ways the ACPD continued to advocate for the needs and rights of persons with disabilities was throughout the review of the City's taxi industry ordinance. This advocacy contributed several key elements to the newly adopted industry ordinance including certification and training of drivers regarding persons with special needs, development of a disciplinary plan including additional training, and a requirement that 1% of all taxi vehicles be accessible. These elements are essential to ensuring the independence of residents with disabilities.

DOT is the City of Alexandria's paratransit program for persons with disabilities who are not able to use fixed-route public transportation due to their disability. DOT has helped individuals maintain, and in some cases, gain independence. DOT serves as an extension of public transportation available to Alexandria residents by using taxicabs and wheelchair accessible vans. DOT service is provided curb-to-curb with pre-arranged pickup locations and scheduled pickup and drop off times. Eligibility to use DOT is based on the eligibility requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act and service is available throughout the City of Alexandria, Arlington and Fairfax Counties, and the Cities of Fairfax and Falls Church.

At this time, DOT service is not available to Washington, DC or Maryland. Persons with

disabilities needing paratransit travel to the District of Columbia or Maryland can use MetroAccess, which is the regional ADA paratransit service.

In a continuing effort to improve the program, the ACPD partnered with DOT and supported its budget request of \$30,000 for an upgrade to its Information Technology program. Future efforts could include a consideration to expand services outside of Northern Virginia.

The Alexandria Transit Company operates DASH, which serves as the City of Alexandria's bus system. All DASH buses are wheelchair accessible and there are a number of "talking buses" which identify stops, intersections, and points of interest, among other things, for persons with visual impairments. DASH does not have a reduced fare for persons with disabilities and it does not accept the Washington Metropolitan Area Transportation Authority's ("WMATA") disability fare flash pass.

The ACPD believes that DASH should adopt the use of the WMATA Senior and Disabled ID card and have reduced DASH fares for these populations, as do all other transportation programs in jurisdictions within the WMATA region. This is an issue in which the ACPD's Transportation Committee has taken an interest and will work toward making the fare transfer between WMATA's Metro and MetroBus seamless, as is the case with other transportation systems in Northern Virginia. And perhaps most importantly, ACPD will encourage all transportation systems in Alexandria to actively seek input and recommendations from persons with disabilities.

Medical and Therapeutic Services

Increasingly, in the City of Alexandria and all across the country, persons with disabilities are struggling with accessible and affordable medical insurance and services. It is clear that the soaring costs of health care combined with low incomes and limited or no insurance coverage prevent many people with disabilities from seeking and receiving adequate health care. In addition, both physical and attitudinal barriers prevent many persons with physical and sensory disabilities from obtaining basic health care services.

Specific problems and concerns identified by respondents included difficulty obtaining essential durable medical equipment; lack of information on accessible doctor's offices and health care facilities; the need for in-home support of caregivers for persons with disabilities; lack of transportation; and lack of money for dental care, prescriptions, and other services not covered by Medicare.

While some medical and therapeutic services can be accessed and obtained through Medicare or Medicaid, neither of these programs should be considered to be comprehensive sources of service. The Department of Human Services and other state

and local agencies have limited funds to purchase medications on an emergency basis and a few pharmaceutical companies offer reduced cost programs for specified medications, but again the barrier seems to be gaining knowledge of and access to these programs.

Some medical and emergency dental care can be accessed through free or reduced cost clinics for persons with disabilities who have low incomes. The Alexandria Health Department offers free health and dental care to all income eligible persons with disabilities.

Improvement in access to medical and therapeutic services is often determined to be a legislative issue related to Medicare and Medicaid, but all remedies should be considered and explored to solve this crisis. It is important that goals be set and reached to develop awareness and understanding of the needs of persons with disabilities in the medical community and to increase outreach to ensure persons with disabilities are aware of and have access to available medical and therapeutic services tailored to their needs.

Two respondents addressed one area of special note – hearing aids. One noted that there is a serious problem with the fact that there are not any dispensers in Northern Virginia who will dispense hearing aids for children covered by Medicaid and Unicare. Another identified as being gainfully employed with the Federal government and having a profound hearing loss, but could function well with hearing aids and other amplifying technology. However, the concern was that if the hearing loss worsened, hearing aids would no longer be beneficial. Planning ahead, the person noted that they were reading about services for persons with disabilities on the Internet, but still did not know what kind of services might be available. The person's recommendation was that the City better inform the public of services that are available.

Accessible Housing

This theme is constant in previous and the most recent Needs Assessment undertaken by the ACPD. Repeatedly it has been demonstrated that affordable, accessible housing is one of the top priorities in Alexandria for persons with disabilities. A lack of accessible, affordable housing not only in the City of Alexandria, but also in the neighboring jurisdictions, is a major fundamental barrier to independent living for persons with disabilities. Other barriers include a lack of readily available information on the availability and location of accessible housing and available programs for accessibility modifications.

The City's Office of Housing's Residential Assistance Modification Program ("RAMP") has actively worked to modify and rehabilitate existing housing to meet the accessibility needs of residents. ACPD continues to make referrals to the program, but will do more

to promote and inform persons with disabilities that RAMP is actively seeking to assist persons with accessibility and modifications needs.

The City of Alexandria also has a Home Rehabilitation Loan Program whereby qualifying homeowners can receive funds to make accessibility modifications to their homes. Furthermore, nonprofit organizations in the City have programs to rehabilitate or install accessibility improvements in the homes of qualified applicants. Real property tax and rent relief programs are also available to persons with disabilities who meet certain criteria, but these programs are poorly publicized and as a result the impact of these programs is minimal. Improved awareness is needed.

The ACPD will continue to advocate to City Council and the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority on behalf of persons with disabilities about the dire and critical need of affordable, accessible housing in the City. In addition, the ACPD can strive to increase collaboration and coordination with area agencies and nonprofit organizations to address the critical need Alexandria citizens have for ramps and other home and apartment modifications.

Implications for ACPD Action

The Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities will continue its work on behalf of persons with disabilities in Alexandria to remove all remaining physical and attitudinal barriers and to ensure equal access and full integration to all programs, services, and activities. In addition, the ACPD will encourage the community to maintain a commitment to persons with disabilities and to ensure an environment that promotes equal opportunity and independence.

The ACPD recognizes that it will need to do more to strengthen and improve awareness and actively seek to increase programs and services for persons with disabilities in the three specific areas identified in this report and other areas of concern. One of the ways the ACPD can initiate and promote awareness is to develop and implement an effective outreach strategy. This step can include developing and distributing informational materials that will identify City government programs and services available for persons with disabilities. In addition, a similar listing of service providers and disability-related nonprofit organizations in the City would also assist in providing much needed informational resources for Alexandrians with disabilities.

It should be noted that the ACPD is in the beginning stages of developing a web site presence to serve as an informational resource on the Commission, provide awareness to the community of the City's disability resources coordinator, and other disability-related services and issues.

On behalf of Alexandrians with disabilities, the ACPD will continue to advocate, challenge, and partner for further progress for people with disabilities to live, work, be independent, and enjoy the benefits of full access to community life in the City of Alexandria. Reaching these goals will allow the ACPD to function as both a direct resource for persons with disabilities in the City and as a conduit for identifying gaps in services.

Implications for State-Level Action

It is vitally important for the Commonwealth to assist local jurisdictions with its efforts to improve services and programs for its residents with disabilities by working together to discuss solutions to resolve the identified unmet needs in the Needs Assessment surveys. An increase in, or in some cases a development and implementation of, the needed services and programs for persons with disabilities are important for the Commonwealth to recognize. It is also essential to note here that this must be carried out in the communities.

The ACPD also strongly encourages and recommends that an improved survey questionnaire be developed so that more detailed and meaningful information on the local needs of persons with disabilities can be determined. Furthermore, the Commonwealth should strive to ensure additional funding and resources, training and informational materials, and take the lead to encourage dialogue amongst the Disability Services Boards. This would serve as a necessary step in building the foundation and strengthening the structure already in place. The DSBs are in the communities and the state should do more to use them to help build relationships with persons with disabilities in the community and statewide.

Alexandrians with physical and sensory disabilities need and deserve a better informational and referral system and service to gain access to the programs and services to meet their needs with transportation, medical and therapeutic services, and housing. The first step can begin with the ACPD, in conjunction with the City and State, doing a better job of eliminating the confusing and oftentimes unknown network of service delivery systems.

Persons with physical and sensory disabilities in the City of Alexandria experience significant difficulties in identifying and accessing available services and resources that could help address their many unmet needs. The ACPD can build on its partnerships with City agencies, boards, commissions, service providers, and others to pool resources to begin addressing these critical unmet needs of persons with physical and sensory disabilities.

The City of Alexandria is committed to compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.
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